It’s all very well to amass an enormous bibliography and have all your sources scattered artfully on your desk. But if you’re assuming that your essay or research report is now as good as written, you’re a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic. Getting the research materials is only half the battle. Now you have to read them and evaluate them. This chapter majors on the joys of reading and note-taking.

Reading for the Connoisseur and the Glutton

With a tantalizing heading like the one above, you may want to head for the nearest cafeteria. But read on—food for the mind is better than French fries. Our generation is very big on what is commonly called "escapist fiction." This is the kind of book that makes no claim to be great literature with deep themes but does promise to take you out of yourself and into a far more exciting world.

The advantage of a thriller is that it gives you a way to escape. You can sit back and let it happen without pondering or analyzing too deeply. Let the skilled thriller writer feed you the adventure until you scream for mercy. Escapist fiction is for gluttons.

I do not, however, call a well-crafted mystery novel "escapist" in the same sense. The writer of this kind of work dares you at every point not only to figure out who did it, but why and how whoever did it did it. In other words, such a writer does not want you to swallow the novel whole (as in a thriller) but to read it with discernment, pausing to think over clues with reserve and intelligence. The well-crafted mystery novel is for connoisseurs.

Where is all this leading? Simply to this basic statement: Research is not for gluttons.
Consider the problem you face: You have twenty-five scattered sources and seven Web sites waiting to be read. They comprise 3,423 pages in total. At an average rate of one page every two minutes, this will take you 6,846 minutes to read, or, in more familiar terms, 114.1 hours. If you skip classes for two weeks (or take a vacation from your job) and read 8.15 hours per day, you will have it all read. But wait a minute (even though you have none of these to spare)—I haven’t allowed you the time you need to take notes on what you’re reading nor to ponder its value. You’d better plan on three weeks.

Before we get too far into the realm of the ridiculous, I think you can see that there is no way you will be able to read and take notes on 3,423 pages for one research project. The approach that works so well for devouring spy novels—gluttonously reading without much thought—is going to sink you when you try to read research materials. There has to be a way to determine what’s important and what’s a red herring (or a blue elephant).

Let me show you the connoisseur’s approach to reading:

**Be Ruthless**

You may not like what I have to say now, but I do have to say it. *Any book or article you read for research purposes must be used and discarded as quickly as possible.*

You need information. The source you are reading has information. The problem is that it has too much information that is not relevant to your research topic. Thus you need to use every skill you have to sift quickly through the material you don't need and find the material you do need.

You are writing a paper that is due, along with two others, in seven days. **Be ruthless.** Read what you need and abandon the rest. It’s your only hope.

*One big note of caution:* I am not urging you to read out of context. You have to read enough of an author’s work to have a good idea of his or her main message. It’s all very well to be efficient and discerning (the connoisseur) rather than a mindless sponge (the glutton), but be very sure you have grasped not only what the author is saying, but why the author is saying it.

**Get to Know the Material without Reading It All**

No, this is not an invitation to do skimpy research. This is an attempt to show you how to zero in on what you need without missing anything important.

Here are the steps to take, first for books, then for articles:

**Books [More detail in the print edition]**

- **First,** at the start of the process, have a good look at the title page, preface, foreword, and introduction.

- **Second,** check out the table of contents. This table forms the skeleton upon which the body is hung, the keystone that supports the building, the street signs that give meaning to the metropolis, the—but why go on? The point is simply that the table of contents provides you with the basic structure of the book in its proper order.

- **Third,** have a look at the index.

- **Fourth,** be sure to give the book a run-through, even if you are only going to use a part of it. If you fail to do so, you may miss completely the overall intent of the volume and thus misunderstand what you are reading in one portion of it. A run-through includes: Reading opening and concluding portions of each chapter, considering the subheadings in the body of each chapter, going over any summary or conclusion chapter at the end of the book, and possibly looking up a book review or two if the book is confusing or potentially controversial.

- **Fifth,** when it comes to reading the appropriate portion(s) of the book, be a connoisseur of the argumentation, not a glutton who does not evaluate what s/he's eating as long as s/he's got food in front of him or her. There is only one way to read when you are doing research—by asking constant questions.

**Articles [More detail in the print edition]**

With a journal article, or an essay within a book, you lack some of the more familiar signposts—tables of contents, indexes, sometimes even subheadings in the text. To add to the problem, the writer may argue a complex point over several pages without stating a conclusion until the last moment. How do you get a grasp of the article’s message in short order and make good use of it?

- **First,** find an abstract (a summary of the article) if you can locate one quickly.

- **Second,** watch for key propositions. **Key what?? A key proposition,** despite its strange name, is a simple concept. A key proposition is a statement of what the author believes to be true.
Third, check out the author’s conclusion at the end of the article carefully.

Fourth, if the article you are reading still gives you few clues, read the whole thing.

A Final Word on Analytical Reading

We have been talking hard realities here—too little time and too much to read. Remember that books and journal articles are sources of data. Develop those skills that will help you extract data with the greatest speed and efficiency. But beware of quoting an author out of context because you did not read enough to get the author’s overall message.

Evaluation of Research Resources

Much of what we might call “evaluation” is part of analytical reading—trying to discern what the author is saying and how credible the author’s arguments appear to be. But I do want to add something about the overall evaluation process.

Evaluation has to do with determining the following: [More detail in the print edition]

- The qualifications of the author.
- The biases of the author. Bias is not necessarily a bad thing, because none of us are 100% objective. It may, indeed, be the bias of the author that is most important to you. What is important here is that you identify the biases of authors so that you can walk into their works with eyes wide open.
- The level of opinion as opposed to evidence.
- Whether or not the material is relevant to the problem you are addressing.

A great resource for evaluation clues is [http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Evaluation.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Evaluation.html)

Note Taking

You may know some of those rare people who never take notes on the data they are discovering in research. Instead, they gather all their books and articles around themselves just before they start writing their first draft, then cite and quote their sources simply by hauling books out of the pile and looking up appropriate passages. Such people, of course, have photographic memories and the organizational skills of Noah loading the ark. Or they are really only using one source for most of their data while occasionally referring to others to cover up the limited nature of their research. Perhaps (heaven forbid), they’re writing their research paper out of their heads and using the occasional book or article citation only as some sort of weak signal to the reader that they did some actual research.

For most of us, it’s crucial as we read that we distill out the essential things we are going to have to include in our research paper. We don’t have the minds nor the stamina to retain everything, unaided by notes, at least not once our research goes beyond four or five sources.

Generally I recommend taking notes from one source at a time, covering everything in source (book, article, etc.) before moving on to the next one.

One of the biggest problems most students face is that they take too many notes that will later go unused. The key to this problem is to have a good research question and preliminary outline as soon as possible in the research process. If you are one of those people who only discerns your outline for the first time while you are proof-reading the final copy of your paper, you have probably wasted a lot of time taking notes that ended up in the round file beside your desk. After all that needless effort, your paper is probably not very good anyway, because its structure was never planned. If, on the other hand, you have a fairly good idea of what you want to accomplish with your research project, you are less likely to take notes on irrelevant information.

Once you have a clear vision how you want your research materials to help you deal with your question, you next have to decide on a note-taking style.

The Determined Photo-Copier [More detail in the print edition]

For some students, note taking is easy. Armed with fourteen dollars in dimes, or a charged up copier debit card, they simply photocopy or print everything that looks important, take all 140 copies home, and assemble an essay. Would that most of us could afford this method.

A bit of advice here:
If you are using the copier or computer printer, make sure that you have recorded the author, title, place of publication, publisher and date for every book or article from which you’ve made copies or print-offs (author, title, journal name, volume number, date, and page numbers for journals).

Use a highlight pen on your copies or print-offs as soon as you have made them.

Recognize that you have probably interacted with your material at a superficial level. Go over your photocopies in detail.

The Note-Book Computer Whiz [More detail in the print edition]

With a notebook computer and a portable scanner like the C-Pen or Wizcom QuickLink Pen, you can input large amounts of text without ever photocopying any of it. Inputting is generally not much of a problem, but retrieval is.

If you can identify key words, you can use your word processor “Find” function to locate those words. You can open several windows of material at the same time and compare them right on screen. You can even buy a specialized scholarly word processing system which will allow you to use advanced file and search functions as well as helping you with the final paper and formatting your bibliography by whatever style manual you are using.

One word of caution: Because it is often so easy to input notes, you need to be careful that you keep your notes to a minimum. Simply pulling everything you’ve been reading into computer files is probably counterproductive.

The Quoter [More detail in the print edition]

Some still prefer a low-tech approach with paper and pen or, lacking a portable scanner, they are using their own fingers to type material into computer files. Often the plan is to get down information that is verbatim, that is, take direct quotations. There are some advantages to copying material word for word into your notes, and (inevitably) some disadvantages.

Advantages

- You won’t have to go back to the book or article later on if you need a suitable quotation. It will be right in your notes.
- A quotation method can give you greater accuracy.
- The mere act of copying helps you get to know the material more intimately.

Disadvantages

- The process can become fairly laborious. It’s easier to photocopy.
- You must be very careful to quote enough to catch the context.

The Summarizer [More detail in the print edition]

This person reads a chunk of material, then summarizes it in his or her own words. The point is to condense several pages into a paragraph of notes or a paragraph into a sentence.

Advantages:

- This method is quicker than quoting.
- The process of summarizing forces you to think about the material and make it your own.

Disadvantages:

- The method does not work well if you are dealing with difficult material that is hard to condense.
- You will have to go back to your book or journal article if you find later that you need a quotation.
- You have to be very careful that you understand the things you are reading. If you misunderstand, you have no way of checking for accuracy later on, other than going back to your source material.

The Paraphraser (not recommended in most cases) [More detail, including examples, in the print edition]

The difference between summarizing and paraphrasing is that the former condenses material while the latter rewrites each sentence in the reader’s own words.
**Possible Advantage:**

This method can be helpful if you are working through difficult material.

**Why, in Most Cases, Paraphrasing is a Bad Idea:**

- While sometimes recommended by professors, this method leaves you particularly open to a charge of plagiarism (see the end of this chapter), since you are still reproducing the writer’s work, thought for thought if not word for word.
- In fact, people who paraphrase tend to change far too little of the original to qualify the result as plagiarism-free.
- The method is laborious. Not only do you have to rephrase each sentence, but your notes will be as long as your original source, maybe longer.

Avoid letting paraphrased material appear in an actual research paper you have written. Paraphrased material only puts you at risk. Summarize instead.

**Which Method is Best?**

You can use any or all of these methods, except paraphrasing, to advantage. May I suggest that you keep all of them in your toolkit, using each as is appropriate.

**Further Notes on Note-Taking [See the print edition]**

**A Gentle Warning about the Horrible Crime of Plagiarism [More detail in the print edition]**

Just to end the chapter on a cheery note, let me caution you about the academic crime of plagiarism. Plagiarism, to put it simply, is passing on someone else’s work as your own.

Plagiarism is an academic crime because it is the theft of someone else’s creativity, because it gives the impression that someone else’s words or ideas are your own, and because most astute professors catch offenders quite easily (even those who skim their papers off the Internet), and then feel hurt that they have been lied to. This often results in anything from a zero for the paper to expulsion from the institution.

**8.5.1 Why Get Stressed about Plagiarism? [More detail in the print edition]**

With easy access to the WWW and to online full text journals, plagiarism is increasing. A lot of students struggle with why plagiarism is such a big deal. We download music all the time, and the WWW is full of free information. What’s the difference between downloading a song and downloading text to put into a research paper? The following may provide some answers:

- There is a difference between free access and the ability to claim that you are the author of the information you copied from the Net.
- Intellectual property is a big deal in Western society. To be able to write something and put my name on it is something I value. When someone else takes my material and puts his/her name on it, my intellectual property has been stolen.
- When you take someone else’s words or ideas and pass them off as your own, you rob those words of their power.
- Research writing is a dialogue. As you address your research question, you know that there are other voices out there who have already expressed points of view about possible answers to your question (the sources you are using—books, articles, and so on). Research involves dialoguing with those sources, agreeing with some, disagreeing with others.

**8.5.2 About Getting Caught [More detail in the print edition]**

Just at the time when it’s easier than ever to steal electronic text and paste it into your research project, passing it off as your own, it’s easier than ever to get caught. If you plagiarize an author’s unique ideas, chances are your professor already knows what those unique ideas are. But even if you steal text, your professor can catch you very easily.

So it’s getting easier to be caught at the plagiarism game. The results are pretty awful. If your professor is really merciful you’ll need to rewrite your paper. Normally the paper gets a zero, with no chance for a rewrite. But at many institutions it doesn’t stop there. The plagiarism goes on your academic file, you may be given a failing mark, and you...
could even be suspended or expelled. Overall, plagiarism can look like an easy way to let someone else do
For a PowerPoint on plagiarism: [http://www.acts.twu.ca/LBR/plagiarism.ppt](http://www.acts.twu.ca/LBR/plagiarism.ppt).
For an article expanding on my approach to plagiarism, see Badke, William. “Give Plagiarism the Weight It Deserves.”

### 8.5.3 International Students and Plagiarism

International students face some unique challenges with the plagiarism issue. In many cultures, information is seen as
the property of the community more than it is the property of the individual. In fact, when other people in a community
copy or freely use the information of a great scholar, they are honoring that scholar. If information is seen as communal
property, using someone else’s words or ideas does not appear to be a serious problem.

Yet even in societies where information is communal, it remains wrong to pretend that other people’s words or ideas are
your own. Even information that belongs to the community still had an author. If you leave the impression that you are
the author, you are committing fraud.

Unfortunately, as well, international students who struggle with English are more likely to be caught when then
plagiarize than native English speakers. Why? Because the style of English in the plagiarized material is so obviously
different from the style of an English as a second language writer. It is not that international students plagiarize more
often than domestic students. It is that international student plagiarists are easier to detect.

For a handbook to guide you in every aspect of your academic life as an international student, including plagiarism, see
William Badke, *Beyond the Answer Sheet: Academic Success for International Students*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com,

[The print edition has a study guide and combined practice exercise/assignment at this point.]